



## **Kierkegaard and the internet: Existential reflections on education and community**

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**Abstract.** If the rhetorical and economic investment of educators, policy makers and the popular press in the United States is any indication, then unbridled enthusiasm for the introduction of computer mediated communication (CMC) into the educational process is wide-spread. In large part this enthusiasm is rooted in the hope that through the use of Internet-based CMC we may create an expanded community of learners and educators not principally bounded by physical geography. The purpose of this paper is to reflect critically upon whether students and teachers are truly linked together as a “community” through the use of Internet-based CMC. The paper uses the writings of Kierkegaard, and Hubert Dreyfus’s exploration of Kierkegaardian ideas, to look more closely at the prospects and problems embedded in the use of Internet-based CMC to create “distributed communities” of teachers and learners. It is argued that from Kierkegaard’s perspective, technologically mediated communications run a serious risk of attenuating interpersonal connectivity. Insofar as interpersonal connectivity is an integral component of education, such attenuation bodes ill for some, and perhaps many instances of Internet-based CMC.

**Key words:** authenticity, community, computer mediated communication, Dreyfus, education, internet, Kierkegaard

### **I. Internet use: Prospects and problems**

In the twentieth century, the principal delivery system for secondary and post-secondary education has been immediately interpersonal in nature. Students have attended geographically located classes in which the instructor, or someone designated by the instructor, provided instruction in the relevant discipline. This meant, amongst other things, that it was not uncommon for students to develop interpersonal relations with one another, and to feel that, in enrolling in and attending classes, they had become members of a community of learners. One need only look at the “student unions”, clubs, societies, public lectures, and other organizations and events to see this characterization of secondary and post-secondary education confirmed.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, with the advent of computers networked through Internet Service Providers and the downward spiral for the cost of personal computers, the traditional topography of secondary and post-secondary education has begun to change. For students the development, dissemination, and economics of the new information technology

means that they can now take classes over the Internet without ever leaving the confines of their homes. More than this, students, using “laptop computers” and the ubiquitous Internet Service Providers, can now literally travel anywhere and still have access to instruction. Similarly, students no longer need physically attend public lectures and symposia in order to receive the benefits provided by both. With suitable foresight and a modicum of technological expertise on the part of the lecture and symposia sponsors, both can be broadcast out via the Internet to a geographically non-localized, albeit technologically linked, audience. Indeed, a recent survey from Market Data Retrieval, a Dun and Bradstreet educational research company, reveals that for 1999–2000, 34% of two- and four-year colleges offer degrees via Computer Mediated Communication (CMC),<sup>1</sup> compared to 15% in 1998.<sup>2</sup> For instructors, the possibilities opened up

<sup>1</sup> By “computer mediated communication” we mean communications that make use of the Internet, the World Wide Web, or some commensurate form of information technology.

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press, “College Net use growing.” Moreover, as reported by the Associated Press, “Most public schools connected to Net,” access to the Internet by United States public

by CMC are no less revolutionary. Just as students no longer need attend some common geographically located classroom in order to receive instruction, so too instructors need not be geographically linked to the school for which they provide instruction. A recent recognition of this change precipitated by CMC can be found in the *Chronicle for Higher Education*, which now has a "distance education" subsection in its classifieds. People seeking to be involved as educators from locations other than the home campus of the advertiser may telecommute from any location at which the appropriate information links exist.

What is distinctive about the use of CMC in education is not the use of technology *per se*. As Ron Barnette writes, "[T]echnology – assisted teaching in the classroom has been with us for some time, be it through the use of film, video, overheads, computer-assisted learning, [and] teleconferencing . . ." <sup>3</sup> As early as 1922 Thomas Edison predicted that "the motion picture is destined to revolutionize our educational system . . . in a few years it will supplant largely, if not entirely, the use of textbooks." <sup>4</sup> Near the middle of the twentieth-century, in 1945, William Levenson, then director of the Cleveland public schools' radio station predicted that "the time may come when a portable radio receiver will be as common in the classroom as is the blackboard." <sup>5</sup> Thus, what the use of CMC brings to the classroom is not technology *simpliciter*, but the possibility of creating informationally linked, but geographically distributed classrooms. It is not surprising then, that one of the principal arguments used to justify increasing expenditures on introducing CMC into the educational process is that it will permit students and teachers to "network" with a wide variety of other students and professionals around the globe, to come to understand and appreciate the many cultures that today exist, and to access storehouses of information that might otherwise be inaccessible. As a result, educators, technologists, policy makers, and others have begun to think about the traditional notions of a classroom, lecture hall, and symposium venue, to name only three, in very different ways. Instead of understanding such notions in spatio-geographic terms, we are now being asked to understand, and so too plan for such notions in techno-topological terms. The classroom, with its desks, lights, chalkboards, and other educational tools to which students in the twentieth century have been accustomed, are

school as jumped from slightly over 34% in 1994 to 95% in 1999. Moreover, while in 1998 the ration of public school students to computers was 12 to 1, in 1999 it had improved to 9 in 1.

<sup>3</sup> Barnette, p. 323.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Oppenheimer.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Oppenheimer.

being displaced by the "virtual classroom" <sup>6</sup> of the twenty-first century.

For the greater part of the 1990s, the promises of CMC have captivated the attention of educators, policy makers, and the popular press. For example, in November of 1996, Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson announced a comprehensive K-12 technology program "designed to boost student achievement by linking every Minnesota public school to the Internet." Such a linkage, said Governor Carlson, "will allow students, teachers, parents and businesses to learn and communicate statewide, nationally, and internationally over the Internet. Most importantly," he continued, "it will give our students a leg up on the advanced skills they need to compete and win in the global economy of the 21st century." <sup>7</sup> Governor Carlson's statements echo an earlier 1995 claim by the University of Idaho School of Engineering that one of the advantages of the use of computers in distance education is that they "increase access. Local, regional, and national networks link resources and individuals, wherever they might be." <sup>8</sup> Similarly, Richard A. Crofts, Commissioner of the Montana University System, has said that "[F]or the first time in the history of American higher education, information technology provides the opportunity to increase access to higher education, improve the quality of students' learning experiences, enhance the faculty role as teacher/scholar/learner, and control the costs of education – simultaneously." <sup>9</sup> It is precisely this unbridled enthusiasm of CMC that has led the U.S. government to spend more than 6 billion dollars on its three year E-rate program to make certain that all public schools are "connected to the Internet".

Building on these ideas, and extending them one step further, Vice President Al Gore said in a November 30, 1998 speech that we should hasten the completion of the "information superhighway" because such a technological infrastructure would significantly contribute to the building of a "global village". Creation of this global village, Gore continued, would "expand access to all forms of communications . . . improve the delivery of education and health care and all services, and . . . create new jobs and even whole new industries as yet unimagined." <sup>10</sup> Like Gore, the popular press does not restrict its endorsement of CMC to education. The popular

<sup>6</sup> The expression 'virtual classroom' seems to have been originated, in print, by Starr Roxanne Hiltz in her *The Virtual Classroom: Learning Without Limits via Computer Networks*.

<sup>7</sup> "ETHOS News: Minnesota Spends \$150M on 'Learning Communities'."

<sup>8</sup> "Computers in Distance Education: Guide #7."

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Borgmann, pp. 259–260 n. 34.

<sup>10</sup> "Remarks by the President and Vice President at Electric Commerce Event" (November 30, 1998), on-line at

press is filled with reports of how CMC permits everything from seniors gathering health information and staying in touch with geographically distant friends and family, to on-line banking, e-commerce, and finding the best bargains in goods and services ranging from home loans to lawyers. For many people, CMC promises a way that they can connect with other people, access information, acquire goods and services, and create new forms of socio-political-economic relations, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Of course it is easy to be swept up in the enthusiasm attendant with the introduction of a technological innovation such as CMC and to overlook its potential problems; and like any other technology, the use of CMC does seem to have potential problems. For example, a recent 1998 study conducted at Carnegie Mellon concludes that “[G]reater use of the Internet was associated with small, but statistically significant declines in social involvement as measured by communication within the family and the size of people’s local social networks, and with increases in loneliness ... [and] with increases in depression.”<sup>11</sup> The study goes on to say that the paradox of the Internet is that it is “a social technology used for communication with individuals and groups, but it is associated with declines in social involvement and the psychological well-being that goes with social involvement.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in their commentary on the Carnegie Mellon study, Michelle Weil and Larry Rosen write that “[W]e are not surprised that Internet usage leads to changes in both psychological and social variables. Our work over the past 15 years studying peoples’ reactions to technology suggests the same ... We have found that increased computer use in the home can envelope people in what we call a “TechnoCocoon” – isolating them from others as they spend more time in front of the screen.”<sup>13</sup> This same conclusion is also reached in a more recent 1999–2000 Stanford University study that polled 4,113 individuals and 2,689 households, including both Internet users and nonusers. What the study revealed, according to Norman Nie, a political scientist at Stanford University who was the principal for the study, was that “the more hours people use the Internet, the less time they

[www.npr.gov/cgi-bin/print\\_hit\\_bol...s/rmkselec.html?Information+Superhighway](http://www.npr.gov/cgi-bin/print_hit_bol...s/rmkselec.html?Information+Superhighway).

<sup>11</sup> Kraut, Lundmark, Patterson, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, and Scherlis. Also see Perry, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> Kraut, Lundmark, Patterson, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, and Scherlis.

<sup>13</sup> Weil and Rosen. Also see Don Ihde, *Existential Technics*, who, in characterizing life in the “Technological World”, writes, p. 21, that “[L]ife takes shape within and often literally inside various forms of technological cocoons. Home is a spaceship.”

spend with real human beings.”<sup>14</sup> Nie went on to claim that the Internet is creating a broad new wave of social isolation in the United States, “raising the spectre of an atomized world without human contact or emotion.”<sup>15</sup> At its worse, then, rather than the Internet providing a tool for the creation of an interactive environment, we may have a situation in which, as Fred Moody, in a commentary for ABC News puts it, “[A]ny time we go online, we are replacing direct human contact ... with an arid, indirect, stilted form of contact with strangers.”<sup>16</sup> In this connection, a 1999 ABC News Survey of more than 17,000 people found that 6% of Web users, about 6 million U.S. residents, could be considered “Web-addicts” – people who engage in repetitive, obsessive, interpersonally dysfunctional, anonymous interactions with other people.<sup>17</sup>

While studies such as those of Carnegie Mellon, Weil and Rosen, and Stanford are provisional, they do at least suggest that it is prudent to reflect upon how the use of the Internet in education might affect both students and instructors. After all, the purpose of introducing Internet-based distance education was, in large part, to create an interconnected, interrelated community of learners and educators.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to provide critical reflection on one important aspect associated with the creation and use of virtual classrooms. Specifically, we will examine whether students are more closely linked together as a “community” of learners through the use of virtual classrooms. Contrary to the claims of many technological advocates who say that the use of virtual classrooms will enhance the development of distributed communities of learners, we will suggest that the so-called “educational communities” that emerge with the use of the virtual classroom are often isolating rather than connecting.

Even before current reports of isolation and depression caused by use of the Internet, there were skeptics who questioned and, in some cases, shunned the enthusiasm that usually greets the use of technology as a tool for “bringing people together”. For example, in the 19th century Søren Kierkegaard argued that the information technology of his day, the “daily press”, “is and remains the evil principle in the modern

<sup>14</sup> Markoff.

<sup>15</sup> Markoff.

<sup>16</sup> Moody.

<sup>17</sup> Yang, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> As Vice President Gore said in a November 23, 1998 speech, “[F]or the first time in our history, these new tools are making it possible for a child in the most isolated inner-city neighborhood or rural community to have access to the same world of knowledge at the same instant as a child in the most affluent suburb.” On-line at [www.pub.whitehouse.gov/urires/I2R?urn:pdi://omea.eop.gov.us/1998/11/25/9.text.1](http://www.pub.whitehouse.gov/urires/I2R?urn:pdi://omea.eop.gov.us/1998/11/25/9.text.1).

world.”<sup>19</sup> While Kierkegaard did acknowledge that the press unites people in a kind of “public personality”, such unification did not really serve to truly bring people together. Rather, the public personality created by the press “is neither a nation, nor a generation, nor a community, nor a society . . .”<sup>20</sup> Building on Kierkegaard’s ideas, Hubert Dreyfus has recently suggested that the Kierkegaard’s critique of 19th century information technology can be fruitfully extended to the late 20th, early 21st century Internet information technology. In particular, Dreyfus uses the ideas of Kierkegaard to explore potential limitations in the use of the Internet as a means for establishing social commitments and building communities. If Kierkegaard and Dreyfus are correct, then even apart from the pause given by studies such as those of Carnegie Mellon to an enthusiastic acceptance of CMC, there are good reasons to be cautious in an unqualified race to use CMC in education. Accordingly, in what follows we use both Kierkegaard and Dreyfus’ exploration of Kierkegaardian ideas to look more closely at the prospects and problems embedded within the use of CMC as a tool for creating “distributed communities” of teachers and learners.

## II. Dreyfus’s use of Kierkegaard

In an unpublished 1997 paper, Dreyfus argues that Kierkegaard’s writings show concern about a diminishing ability of his contemporaries to discern “quality” or meaningful information. As Kierkegaard saw it, the use of technologies, such as those exemplified by the 19th century popular press, to disseminate information distorts our relationship to that information in a way that caters to irresponsible modes of communication. In part this irresponsibility relies on an ability of people to ignore the potential “meaningfulness” of a particular piece of information. Technology serves as a key protagonist in this situation. Dreyfus captures an important component of Kierkegaard’s view of the role of technology in irresponsible modes of communication when he writes:

According to Kierkegaard the present age is characterized by reflection and detachment. People take an interest in everything but are not committed to anything. [Kierkegaard] attributed this growing *cultivation of curiosity* and the consequent failure to distinguish the important from the trivial to [tech-

nology] which in his day was making every sort of information available to anyone and everyone.<sup>21</sup>

For the 19th century Kierkegaard, it was the technology embodied in populist newspapers that was of the greatest concern. As Kierkegaard in 1846 writes:

Evaluation by newspapers will gradually be extended to cover subjects never dreamed of. The other day one of the provincial newspapers reported that a man had been executed by executioner John Doe, who performed the job with fine precision; executioner David Roe, present to whip someone publicly, also performed satisfactorily.<sup>22</sup>

Kierkegaard makes this point in an even more provocative fashion in the margin of an 1846 journal entry when he writes that “I am sure we would get someone to publish a daily designed to be read only in latrines. . .”<sup>23</sup>

Dreyfus, building on this insight, contends that Kierkegaard’s concern about the role of technology in the dissemination of information is even more appropriate in characterizing and evaluating on-line behaviors than it was when Kierkegaard was evaluating the effects of the 19th century popular press. The use of the Internet has, according to Dreyfus, resulted in a leveling of all meaningful differences due to its indiscriminate coverage and dissemination of information. On the World Wide Web, “[N]othing,” writes Dreyfus, “is too trivial to be included. Nothing is so important that it demands significance.”<sup>24</sup> In this respect the

<sup>21</sup> Dreyfus, “Dangers and Vistas on the Information Highway: The Future of Information Technology as Seen in 1850 by Søren Kierkegaard,” p. 2. In his later “Anonymity versus commitment: The dangers of education on the Internet,” Dreyfus, p. 16, writes:

In his essay, *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard claimed that his age was characterized by reflection and curiosity. People took an interest in everything but were not committed to anything. He attributed this growing cultivation of curiosity and consequent failure to distinguish the important from the trivial to the press.

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 2, F–K*, entry #2145.

<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 2, F–K*, entry #2144.

<sup>24</sup> Dreyfus, “Dangers and Vistas on the Information Highway: The Future of Information Technology as Seen in 1850 by Søren Kierkegaard,” p.2 In his later “Anonymity versus commitment: The dangers of education on the Internet,” p. 16, Dreyfus writes:

What Kierkegaard envisaged as a consequence of the press’s indiscriminate coverage and dissemination is now being realized on the World Wide Web. All qualitative distinctions

<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 2, F–K*, entry #2148.

<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, p. 63.

effect of the Internet is just that of the 19th century popular press horribly magnified by its incorporation of technological advances. However, as Kierkegaard recognized, the technology is only one side of a more complex phenomenon. For Kierkegaard there is a link between the power of information technologies to uninhibitedly disseminate information to everyone and a concomitant desire of participants to, using Dreyfus's words, "transcend the local, personal involvement" of information. As Kierkegaard writes, since "man is *by nature* an animal creation," it follows that "[a]ll human effort is ... in the direction of running together in a herd."<sup>25</sup> Thus, the negative effects that attend a technology's power to disseminate vast quantities of information rest in the interconnection of the technology's power to disembodiment and dislocate information and people's "animal desire" to the escape the personal in the anonymous numbers of the "herd."<sup>26</sup> Significantly, it is this disembodiedness and dislocatedness, or perhaps more to the point, the *omni*-locatedness of cyberspace, that makes it an attractive replacement for the classroom. By placing educational materials in an omnilocated state, we may then make them available to everyone who has the technological means to "transcend the local". As President Bill Clinton said in an April 19, 1997 radio address to the nation, "[O]nce we reach our goal of linking our schools to the Internet, for the first time in history, children in the most isolated rural schools, the most comfortable suburbs, the poorest inner-city schools, all of them will have the same access to the same universe of knowledge."<sup>27</sup>

Dreyfus expands on Kierkegaard's analysis of 19th century technologies and uncovers an important issue that is implicit in the use of CMC. Dreyfus writes:

[I]t may be that there is no way the net can facilitate the embodied unconditional commitments that open new worlds in which information and everyday commitments can ultimately be sorted into those that are relevant and significant and those that are not. Only such commitments can save the net from either the leveling of data or the leveling of commitments, both of which are forms of the consummation of the nihilism of the present age.<sup>28</sup>

are, indeed, being leveled. Relevance and significance have disappeared.

Also see Hoye, p. C1.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted by Westphal, p. 49.

<sup>26</sup> See Westphal, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> April 19, 1997 White House Release, on the Internet at November 23, 1998 White House Release, on-line at: <[www.pub.whitehouse.gov/uri-res/I2R?urn:pdi://oma.eop.gov.us/1997/4/20/1.text.2](http://www.pub.whitehouse.gov/uri-res/I2R?urn:pdi://oma.eop.gov.us/1997/4/20/1.text.2)>.

<sup>28</sup> Dreyfus, "Dangers and Vistas on the Information Highway: The Future of Information Technology as Seen in

The optimism of techno-enthusiasts implies a positive answer to Dreyfus's worry. Yes, there *must* be a way that the use of the Internet can "facilitate the embodied unconditional commitments that open new worlds in which information and everyday commitments can ultimately be sorted into those that are relevant and significant and those that are not." The question of whether such optimism is warranted seems particularly important to the debate about the degree to which educators ought to make use of CMC. Certainly a key part of quality education lies in communicating a sense of significance and a discernable meaningfulness in information. In this connection Dreyfus's analysis raises questions about practical restraints that may inhibit our success in trying to introduce discernment into an arena whose attraction often lies in the absence of such constraint. In addition, Dreyfus's analysis suggests the deeper question of *how* such an introduction is to occur in the disembodied, dislocated atmosphere of cyberspace.

Before we can approach the question of *how* cyberspace may be used to meet the goals of quality communication in general, and educational communication in particular, there is the more radical question of *whether* this can be adequately accomplished at all. To consider this question, we want to look briefly at what the pessimistic outlook might entail and then apply our analysis to the issue of computer-mediated instruction. Following the lead of Dreyfus' paper, we will more carefully examine why Kierkegaard would be pessimistic with regard to the questions posed above.

### III. Kierkegaard and technology

For Kierkegaard there is a clear trajectory in our technological development. Kierkegaard writes that "all mankind's great inventions (railroads, telegraph, etc.) tend to develop and encourage windbaggery"<sup>29</sup> – an ever increasing quantity of information about everything and anything. Further, he writes that this tendency "is continually in the direction of perfecting the means of communication so that the communication of nonsense can spread farther and farther."<sup>30</sup> As Dreyfus points out, Kierkegaard would see our on-line behaviors as a continuation of this trajectory. In Dreyfus's discussion of Kierkegaard though, the question of meaningful discernment of information, and the

1850 by Søren Kierkegaard," p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers: Volume 4, S-Z*, entry #4233.

<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers: Volume 2, F-K*, entry #2170.

resulting possibility of sincere commitments, becomes a merely personal problem. Dreyfus writes:

Kierkegaard certainly thought that unconditional commitments were made by a single individual and that this individual thereby produces a personal level of meaning in the world that need not be shared by others. . . . [B]ut Kierkegaard is notorious for not being interested in reciprocity in love nor in how a leader with a commitment that opens a new world articulates his vision and gains the understanding and trust of followers. If one follows Kierkegaard further than his focus on the single individual trust seems to return as an important issue and so do the issues of locality and embodiment.<sup>31</sup>

However, Kierkegaard need not be taken further, as Dreyfus seems here to suggest, but simply pursued further – that is, to the full extent allowed by his own writings. We would not be adding anything to Kierkegaard’s thought if we extend the discussion of meaningful commitments beyond a simple emphasis on the “single individual” to the relationship of the individual with others. In fact, Kierkegaard indicates a firm (positive) link between the concepts of authentic individuality and authentic community.<sup>32</sup> Thus, contra Dreyfus’s implication, Kierkegaard does not say that the problems of “windbaggery” rest simply in one’s becoming a “single individual”, or an authentic “I”. Rather, Kierkegaard goes on to write that when “[A]ll personal communication and all individuality have disappeared; no one says I or speaks to a Thou. . . . It is the old sophistry of being able to talk – but not of holding a dialogue. For dialogue immediately posits: *Thou and I*, and such questions as require ‘yes’ and ‘no’ . . . .”<sup>33</sup> For Kierkegaard, technology may diminish a discerning stance toward information in ways that not only undermine the authenticity of the individual but, thereby, *also* undermine the authenticity of relationships *between* individuals. Further, within this context the locality and embodiment of communication, which we’ve begun to suggest are threatened by technological mediation, are for Kierkegaard important ingredients of healthy relationships between individuals.

It follows from this that the problem from Kierkegaard’s point of view is not simply that technological development represents a trajectory toward

“windbaggery”, but that it is a trajectory *away from* interpersonal connectivity. “[P]ersonality,” he writes, “has been abolished. . . . All communication is impersonal – and here in particular are the two most dreadful calamities which really are the principle powers of impersonality – [mass communication] and anonymity.”<sup>34</sup> These two “calamities” are inherently linked for Kierkegaard. Our technologically “enhanced” communications media transform our relationship to information in ways that promote anonymous and impersonal communication. Kierkegaard expresses the matter even more forcefully in *The Present Age* when he writes that “[A] public is neither a nation, nor a generation, nor a community, nor a society, nor these particular men, for all these are only what they are through the concrete; no single person who belongs to the Public makes a real commitment.”<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the sort of communication offered by CMC, genuine communication is meant to be face-to-face communication between real, embodied individuals. As Kierkegaard puts it, “God really intended that a person should speak individually with his neighbor and at most with several neighbors.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, for Kierkegaard, the greatest of all errors is to suppose that technologically mediated communication, with its trajectory towards anonymity and the absence of the personal element, could truly unite people. True communication, according to Kierkegaard, is interpersonal and never impersonal.<sup>37</sup>

From Kierkegaard’s perspective, technologically mediated communications run an increasing risk of attenuating interpersonal connectivity. Accordingly, using Kierkegaard’s insights as a starting point, one may infer that there are at least two ways in which technologically mediated communications threaten or compromise interpersonal connectivity. First, technologically mediated communication transforms a participant’s relationship to the information that is exchanged in communication. Second, technologically mediated communication transforms the inter-personal perceptions of the persons participating in the communicating activity. Regarding the first, Sherry Turkle presents the following story in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*:

Peter, a twenty-eight-year-old lecturer in comparative literature, thought he was in love with a

<sup>31</sup> Dreyfus, “Dangers and Vistas on the Information Highway: The Future of Information Technology as Seen in 1850 by Søren Kierkegaard,” p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> For more on the possible connection of Kierkegaard’s idea of authentic individuality to a corresponding idea of authentic community see Prosser.

<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 1, A–E*, entry #673, italics added.

<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 2, F–K*, entry #2152.

<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 2, F–K*, entry #2150.

<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 2, F–K*, entry #2152.

MUDDing partner who played Beatrice to his Dante (their characters' names). Their relationship was intellectual, emotionally supportive, and erotic. Their virtual sex life was rich and fulfilling . . . Peter flew from North Carolina to Oregon to meet the woman behind Beatrice and returned home crushed. "[On the MUD] [said Peter] I saw in her what I wanted to see. Real life gave me too much information."<sup>38</sup>

For Peter, his participation in the MUD affected a radical change to the information exchanged in communication. The information provided by "face-to-face" interactions became too real and too difficult to deal with, whereas the information gleaned through the MUD came to be preferred – it was safer, more comfortable, and more under his own control. More recently, this phenomenon of interactions with the physical world being somehow "too real" has manifested itself in a growing number of people making use of "cyber-commerce". As David Ignatius wrote of the 1999 Christmas shopping rush, "[I]f you're feeling overwhelmed by all the traffic and chaos at you local shopping mall, you can escape by turning on your computer and dialing into the Internet. It's all there, waiting for you . . . [and] We won't see needy people in cyberspace this Christmas. In fact, we won't see many people at all. We can stay at home, avoiding people who don't look or talk like us, who don't occupy the same demographic niche, who don't click on the same things we do."<sup>39</sup> What these cases exemplify is the important role that the medium plays in communication. The examples show that the medium of information exchange affects the beliefs, feelings and attitudes of those to whom the information is conveyed and this in turn affects the individual's comportment to the information. As Don Ihde puts it, the "transformation of the communication situation" is "nonneutral (transformational) with respect to any communication situation which utilizes communications technologies."<sup>40</sup>

Regarding the second transformation – changes in inter-personal perceptions of participants in technologically mediated communications – one need only think of situations that reflect a change in self-perception stemming from the use of different communications media. These changes also affect, in many cases, the presumed rules of dialogue and the boundaries participants place on themselves. For example, in a recent *Newsweek* editorial, one Internet enthusiast says of her "chat-room" experience: "I was immediately hooked by a world where what you write,

not how you look or sound is who you are. It had definite appeal to someone who has always found socializing difficult."<sup>41</sup> As her remarks suggest, the kind of anonymity permitted by technologically mediated communication leads to the realization that one is permitted *to be* something quite different from "real life" – such that, for example, "what you write" actually becomes "who you are". One's digital persona may be quite different than one's real world persona. A person may have one gender in cyberspace and another in the real world, a child may pretend to be a mature adult, and a member of one race or ethnicity may take on an entirely different race or ethnicity in cyberspace. Further, this new sense of self may greatly affect one's sense of comportment toward others – such that, as in this example, the "new" self feels much freer to "socialize" with others. Nor does this example seem particularly unique. It is suggestive of why so many social contexts are moving online. Perhaps the anonymity of shopping online allows one to feel more empowered as a shopper – freer from the pressures of a "hard sell", for example. Such a sense of empowerment can be good. In an educational context, for example, perhaps a student feels more comfortable seeking out the help of professors or fellow students when he or she can do so via email or newsgroups (much the same way that the user noted above felt more comfortable seeking out social interaction).<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, there is also the possibility that a similar sense of empowerment might encourage one to *overstep* boundaries in their interactions with others. Since one's digital persona may give little or no indicators as to one's real identity, the ordinary constraints on interpersonal relations threaten to break down. This breakdown can be seen in incidents of "flaming" (where insulting, derogatory and even threatening messages are sent), and accessing information on others knowing that they will have, at best, a difficult time knowing who has acquired that information. Moreover, there is also the unsettling possibility that the anonymity permitted by technologically mediated communications means that the people whom we "think we know" may be quite different from our so-called knowledge. As Laurie Hays writes, "[H]ow do you react when you discover that your best on-line friend is just a figment of another user's imagination?"<sup>43</sup>

We can at this point, apply these two different, albeit interrelated transformations to the pessimism of someone like Kierkegaard. Both transforma-

<sup>38</sup> Turkle, p. 207.

<sup>39</sup> Ignatius, p. G1.

<sup>40</sup> Ihde, *Existential Technics*, p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> Szalavitz.

<sup>42</sup> For discussions of how anonymity may have positive benefits, see both Baumeister and Dubrovsky, Kiesler and Sethna.

<sup>43</sup> Hays, p. R. 16.

tions affected by the use of information technologies are ones that, as Kierkegaard suggests, diminish a healthy sense of interpersonal connectivity. Kierkegaard's pessimistic view of technologically mediated communication rests in the belief that the contexts of embodied interaction create a particular connectivity that is essential to communication. Here lies the depth of the problem posed by cyberspatial communication. While at one level there is communication using technological means, it is a communication that distances and breaks down interpersonal relationships rather than building them. This is the paradox. It seems that technology, because it permits a kind of omnilocatedness of individuals in the communication activity, should enhance interpersonal connectedness. For example, Gary Shank and Donald Cunningham claim that conversation in virtual communities "will continue to be more and more nonlinear and less hierarchical." This, they go on to write, "helps to preserve ... [an] egalitarian atmosphere" enhancing the possibilities of conversation "since there is no "teacher" or primary "discussant" to lecture or lead the discussion."<sup>44</sup> If Kierkegaard is right though, rather than enhancing the possibilities of conversation and community building, the nonlinear and non-hierarchical character of cyberspace is depersonalizing, and so antithetical to both possibilities.<sup>45</sup> By dis-locating the locus and structure of conversation, the Internet stymies and breaks down interpersonal connectedness by affecting an unstable "identity schizophrenia".

On the one hand, discussants are isolated Cartesian-like selves, wrapped in "TechnoCocoons" separated from the "real world" of everyday interpersonal interactions. In this connection, the experiences of Barnette are especially revealing. In the summer of 1994 Barnette launched his "Philosophy in Cyberspace" course – PHICYBER – "accessible on-line twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for the ten-week term."<sup>46</sup> The class began with twenty-one participants, but only a year later, had grown to one hundred eleven participants "from eleven countries representing five continents."<sup>47</sup> While exemplifying the ideal of an educational "community" that is truly informationally linked and geographically distributed, the cost is a distinctive kind of isolation for the participants. As Barnette writes, for the participants:

There are no voices or accents, no noises, nor distinctions based on gender, race, ethnicity or

<sup>44</sup> Shank and Cunningham, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> See Fortner. With respect to the hierarchical character of cyberspace, see Reid.

<sup>46</sup> Barnette, p. 324.

<sup>47</sup> Barnette, p. 324.

age. Only ideas, and ideas about ideas, formulated, written, and rewritten, expressed and revisited. In fact, the ongoing discussion in the class *is* the set of ideas expressed. A participant becomes, in a sense, a Platonist in cyberspace, instantiated by material objects and electricity!<sup>48</sup>

It is this "post-modern" effect of dis-locatedness that leads to feelings of isolation as well as feelings, or a feeling, that the world apart from cyberspace is somehow "too real". At the same time though, the dis-locatedness engendered by Internet mediated communication also leads in the opposite direction, to a fracturing of the self. In a geographically based world, the embodiment of a person is an essential component of his or her identity. This physical embodiment adds a certain stability to the person's identity and accounts for a significant portion of one's own sense of self. In cyberspace, though, divorced from an embodied existence, personal identity is increasingly determined by the information relations that one has to other people. At its most extreme, the self is entirely constituted by those information relations. However, without the geographical grounding, the information communities in which one participates often have no common link – there is one for the person's interest in philosophy, another for an interest in Japanese anime, another for an interest in meeting single people over the age of 35, and so on. Without a geographical foundation, the individual is fractured by these different and potentially competing information links. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Shank and Cunningham, for all their apparent support of using the Internet in community building, claim that in an Internet culture, as opposed to an oral culture, "[P]ersonal identities are less important..."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Albert Borgmann, in his 1999 book *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*, suggests that, at least within the context of education delivery, the dis-locatedness engendered by Internet mediated instruction threatens the very idea of the self. As he writes, for advocates of "education in cyberspace":

There is a remarkable parallel between the mind of the learned and the structure of a personal computer. The latter, in its quiescent state, knows nothing. It knows *how* to retrieve and process information, and its storehouse of information, the hard disk, can be huge and contain as much information as

<sup>48</sup> Barnette, p. 325. It is important to note that Barnette sees this as a virtue of education mediated through the Internet by the creation of virtual classrooms. We have a much different take on Barnette's characterization.

<sup>49</sup> Shank and Cunningham, 39.

a small library does. But its working memory, the main memory, is empty every time the computer begins its work. In fact, even what it has permanently learned about how to learn is reduced to a minimum so that it is free to acquire different or even more advanced systems of how to operate. In both the computer and the learner, the complement to “having the world database at your fingertips” is to have nothing in your head.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to those who see the Internet as an important tool in community building, Kierkegaard insists that genuine communication involves the confrontation of, and the bridging between, particular, embodied, situated individuals. The error of our technological trends, according to Kierkegaard, is that they affect and accelerate a loss of this sense of particular, embodied, and situated persons. Consequently, the social aggregations that emerge are not constituted by people who have committed, serious, personal relationships with one another. The relationships are purely formal relationships based on a shared vicarious interest in the trivial.

In sum, from Kierkegaard’s perspective, there are at least three underlying issues that lead to questioning the unqualified acceptance of CMCs and their ability to “create” communities:

1. Information Overload – CMCs, like newspapers in the 19th century, permit and encourage the dissemination of increasing amounts of information. This has two results: (a) The distinction between what is important and trivial, what is private and public, breaks down; (b) The ability of people to discern accurate from inaccurate, veridical accounts from opinions or propaganda breaks down. Both (a) and (b) lead people to take a detached and superficial interest in everything and anything. People take a vicarious interest in the trivial and are willing to pass judgment without any first-hand knowledge.
2. Anonymity – CMCs greatly enhance the opportunities for anonymous information exchanges. People can go “on-line” 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and find other on-line personae with whom to exchange information. More importantly, these exchanges can be anonymous with the participants choosing to reveal as much or as little as they want. In the so-called interactive world created by CMC – what Kierkegaard would call “the Public Sphere” – anonymity encourages a lack of seriousness and erodes the reason and desire for responsibility. As Kierkegaard writes, in the Public Sphere “[A]t any moment reflection is

capable of explaining everything quite differently and allowing one some way of escape.”<sup>51</sup>

3. The Personal Element in the Formation of Self-Image – In connection with (2), Kierkegaard’s principal concern is that genuine/authentic communication involves a personal commitment. In such communication a person both reveals and finds himself and herself. This last is especially important. If the interactions we have with people via CMCs are “artificial”, arbitrary, and unbounded, then the identity one creates in such dialogues is itself artificial, arbitrary and unbounded – in effect, inauthentic. Identities and a sense of self are formed, in part, by our relations with one another, and to the extent that such relations are shallow and fractured, so too is our emergent sense of self. What is missing, for Kierkegaard, is a sense of passionate commitment. Increasingly surrounded and enticed by the ephemeral world created by CMCs and its anonymous “citizens”, what is missing is a passionate commitment to anything or anyone. Without this we are isolated shadows, mistaking a Gibson-ian “consensual hallucination” for a real, vibrant and supportive community.

#### IV. Kierkegaard, community and the internet

On the assumption that these broadly Kierkegaardian remarks are on track, then insofar as interpersonal connectivity is an integral component of education, such attenuation bodes ill for computer-mediated instruction. Although not based on a Kierkegaardian analysis of community, Neil Postman’s remarks in the PBS documentary “net.learning” certainly typify this concern. According to Postman, “[N]othing ... can replace the bond of a teacher and a student who are physically together. To plunge headlong into a future of virtual education ... would be very, very ‘sad’.”<sup>52</sup> Contrary to Postman’s pessimism, our conclusion here is *not* to say that there is no room for computer mediation in education. The main point for both Kierkegaard and Dreyfus is that face-to-face, embodied interaction provides a context that is too rich to ever be encompassed in a “virtual”, technologically mediated, world. The problem is that human relationships often delve into this deepest of human contexts. Since the relationship between an educator and his or her student falls within the variety of human relationships, it demands that we ask if and when this relationship reaches beyond the framework adequately

<sup>50</sup> Borgmann, p. 206 – our emphasis.

<sup>51</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> Postman’s view as characterized by Andrew Leonard.

captured through CMC. Such is our goal here: to sound a cautionary note that encourages this type of questioning.

On the one hand, it seems quite reasonable to say that not everything that can be learned through computer-mediated instruction requires the special meaningfulness and significance fostered by the “interpersonal connectivity” that Dreyfus and Kierkegaard want to preserve for the sake of our deepest human relations. For example, if we consider Dreyfus’s discussion of the issue we see that his educational ideal would be unique within any educational context – technologically mediated or not. He suggests that “Only by working closely with students in a shared situation in the real world can teachers with strong identities ready to take risks to preserve their commitments pass on their passion and skill so their students can turn information into knowledge and practical wisdom.”<sup>53</sup> Whether or not one agrees that this represents a reasonable ideal for all educational settings, it must be admitted that such a strong sense of mentorship obtaining between teacher and student would be relatively rare in even the traditional University lecture hall or classroom. In this sense, one might argue that Dreyfus’s ideal challenges many forms of pedagogical method and is not specifically directed at education making use of CMC.

Kierkegaard’s analysis draws similar response. As someone for whom education is important, he is concerned with how to affect commitments that manifest themselves not as mere singular events within one’s life but as “life dispositions”. Thus, one Kierkegaard scholar suggests that for Kierkegaard “[E]ducative events become...acts of speech aimed at promoting the fullest attainment of human possibility.”<sup>54</sup> For Kierkegaard, these “life dispositions” which aim at “the fullest attainment of human possibility” represent qualitative differences between particular modes of human existence – what Kierkegaard so often refers to, metaphorically, as “stages”. They are the focus of much of his early pseudonymous work.<sup>55</sup> In such works the conceptual content that distinguishes the attitudes of each “stage” occupies much of the discussion, but in many of these writings there is a concomitant concern with how these different “stages” can be adequately communicated. Kierkegaard’s pedagogical ideal is determined more by these considerations of *how* to commu-

nicate than by questions of *what* is communicated<sup>56</sup> (though, of course, the two questions are never completely separate). Indeed, when Kierkegaard expresses (through a pseudonym) Socratic *maieutic*, the intellectual “midwife subjected to examination by the God”<sup>57</sup>, as his educational ideal, he often emphasizes that the distinctive characteristic of such teaching is its unique method of communication.<sup>58</sup>

For Kierkegaard, of utmost importance is Socrates’ talent for not simply imparting truth but rather eliciting it, apparently from *within* his student, so that learning necessarily entails an appropriation on the part of the learner. The student understands a particular truth only insofar as he or she understands that truth as belonging to him or her, emanating naturally from within, like a recollection. But, in such a process of bringing the truth to someone, the content is never anonymous or impersonal. That is, “absolute” truths are not “objectively” binding in the sense that they transcend the particular “subjectivity” of the individual and therefore simply bind one from without. Rather, their being universally immanent within the individual mind reveals their necessity. Of course such truths often need to be drawn out of a person, by one who better understands those truths, before the person “recollects” their own possession of it. Socrates’ virtue as an educator and the power of his *maieutic*, from Kierkegaard’s perspective, lies in this ability to elicit the personal possession of such truths.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> So Kierkegaard explains: “The modern age has – and I regard this as its basic damage – abolished personality and made everything objective. Therefore men do not come to dwell upon the thought of what does it mean to communicate but hasten immediately to the *what* they wish to communicate. And since almost every such *what*, even at first glance, reveals itself to be something very prolix, there is in the passage of time even less of an opportunity or place for considering what it means to communicate.” *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 1, A–E*, entry #657.

<sup>57</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 12.

<sup>58</sup> Thus, in *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym goes on to describe Socrates’ virtue as an educator as resting in a specific form of communicative relationship rather than the “positive content” of his thought. This leads him, p. 12, to praise Socrates for having “...entered into the role of midwife and sustained it throughout; not because his thought “had no positive content,” but because he perceived that this relation is the highest that one human being can sustain to another. And in this surely Socrates was everlastingly right; for even if a divine point of departure is ever given, between man and man this is the true relationship. . . .”

<sup>59</sup> Kierkegaard expresses this interpretation of Socrates and its relevance to his own pedagogical distinctions when he suggests that “[I]t may be that science can be pounded *into* a person, but as far as esthetic capability is concerned and even more so with the ethical, one has to pound it *out* of him.” *Søren*

<sup>53</sup> Dreyfus, “Anonymity versus commitment: The dangers of education on the Internet”, p. 20.

<sup>54</sup> Manheimer, p. 146.

<sup>55</sup> For example, one or more of these “stages” are the explicit concern of such works as *Either/Or, Stages on Life’s Way and Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard offers a sustained consideration of the difference between this idea of appropriate knowledge versus mere “objective” knowledge. In doing so, he locates the problematic limits of the latter in the fact that “[O]bjective thinking is completely indifferent to subjectivity and thereby to inwardness and appropriation . . . and is therefore no communication, at least no artistic communication, inasmuch as [artistic communication] would always be required to think of the receiver and to pay attention to the receiver’s misunderstanding.”<sup>60</sup> In his *Journals and Papers*, the real pedagogical importance of “artistic communication” becomes clearer in its representation of a fundamental distinction between presupposed educational objectives. Kierkegaard draws out a difference between the mere “communication of knowledge” on the one hand and a “communication of capability”<sup>61</sup> on the other. In the former case, one can simply concern oneself with “the object” of communication whereas in the latter “the communicator and receiver are reflected upon” such that “then we have in the ordinary sense the communication of capability. . . .” What is more, *maieutic* arises as a special form of this “communication of capability” when the reflection, once having begun to consider the actual persons participating in the communication, becomes more intensely focused on the learner. “[T]he receiver is reflected upon [such that] the communicator disappears, as it were, makes himself serve only to help the other to become.”<sup>62</sup> In this kind of communication we find Kierkegaard’s Socrates and his ideal educator. But, it is important to recognize that we cannot have this focus on the hearer that is definitive for Kierkegaard’s “communication of capability” unless we have an actual, embodied person there, receiving the communication. Kierkegaard’s “communication of capability” intends to establish a “pathos-filled” and immediate connection between the teacher and the student.<sup>63</sup> Thus, we also find here why the anonymity, desituatedness, and impersonality of CMC would be a

Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers: Volume 1, A–E*, entries #653:11. See also #649:6.

<sup>60</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 75–76.

<sup>61</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 1, A–E*, entries #649–#657. There he develops a rather detailed outline for his theory of communication. Much of the theory revolves around this distinction between a “communication of capability” versus a mere “communication of knowledge”.

<sup>62</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 1, A–E*, entry #657.

<sup>63</sup> See *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 1, A–E*, entries #653.4 and #653.5.

hindrance to Kierkegaard’s educational ideal.

Situatedness – a shared, localized context within which participants are able to offer mutual concern not only for the objects of their thought, but for each other – is essential to Kierkegaard’s communication of capability. “[I]n relation to the [communication of] capability the teacher and learner form a situation,” Kierkegaard tells us, whereas “[I]n relation to the communication of knowledge, where everything is objective, there is no situation.”<sup>64</sup> What is more, this “situation” is not to be thought of as some artificially contrived setting predetermined by the intended discourse. Rather, Kierkegaard expects a foundation of definite personalities to provide the situation that determines the form of discourse and thereby lends it a unique sense of validity. Accordingly, he tells us that “To a discourse, to a word, also belongs a situation during which it appears or in which it is spoken. If the situation is different, one does not say the same thing but something else. . . . even though the [discourse] is the same.”<sup>65</sup> Without such a context communication can become stilted to an extent that what might otherwise prove ridiculous without more careful consideration is allowed to stand as truthful, maybe even profound, in the impersonal, anonymous situation. Kierkegaard gives the following example of his meaning:

The situation is decisive. If in a situation of actuality I say what the pastor says on Sunday and what everyone at that time approves, all are insulted, embittered, indignant with me, or they find it embarrassing . . . The pastor says: Do not worry about tomorrow, and we all approve. If I were to say the same thing to a merchant who had gone bankrupt that very day, he would take it as a personal insult.<sup>66</sup>

Simply put, in Kierkegaard’s discussion the decisive difference between preaching and teaching is that the teacher is concerned with giving the student access

<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 4, S–Z*, entry #653:13.

<sup>65</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 4, S–Z*, entry #4058. On the particularity of the “definite” personalities which are definitive for this essential situatedness consider entry #4056. There Kierkegaard calls the opposite of the ideal, that is *desituated* discourse, “ventriloquism” and tells us that this “deficiency of character through absence of situation. . . is speaking in such a way that it is impossible to identify who is speaking, it is a shrouding of one’s *I* in the disguise of a third person or an abstract *I*.” As evidenced in an earlier passage, there is a corresponding abstractness between speaker and hearer: “no one says *I* or speaks to a *Thou*.” This absence of a real ‘*I*’ in dialogue with a real ‘*Thou*’ is the essence of desituated discourse in Kierkegaard’s thought.

<sup>66</sup> Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 4, S–Z*, entry #4052.

to truths that can stand up to their “real world” lives. Thus, the difference between mere indoctrination on the one hand, and the possibility of nurturing competent understanding<sup>67</sup> on the other, relies to an important extent on a “shared situation in the real world” rather similar to that advocated by Dreyfus. And, like Dreyfus, Kierkegaard’s concerns over the relatively anonymous and impersonal relationships fostered by technological mediation would imply that he would see the CMC shift as undermining the relational context most important to genuine education.

However, again as with Dreyfus’ educational ideal, it seems that Kierkegaard’s ideal would challenge *many* traditional educational contexts, without special attention to CMC being necessary. Not only does Kierkegaard’s appeal to Socratic *maieutic* seem hyper-idealistic in the sense that a “Yes, Socrates!” response on the part of the student is perhaps much harder to come by than Plato’s dialogues might lead us to believe, but it also seems likely that much of the information that traditional education seeks to impart can be adequately communicated as mere knowledge. Thus, whereas the kind of truths that Kierkegaard’s “pastor” seeks to impart might benefit from a concentration on the “communication of capability” perhaps much of what traditional education seeks to give its students is not quite so “deep”. Is this sense it seems warranted to suggest that Kierkegaard’s analyses leave open a possibility for the positive use of CMC in *some* areas of typical curricula.

While acknowledging the potential value of the Internet as a tool to facilitate certain types of learning, it must be remembered that the student-educator relationship is a human relationship, and should, accordingly, be evaluated like any other. Anyone who has tried to maintain a long-distance relationship with a friend or lover has experienced the dissatisfaction of being confined to letters, phone calls and email in such relationships. Nonetheless, communications mediated by such technologies are often better than nothing at all. The situation with “virtual classrooms” may be similar. It seems likely that Internet based education is, within certain boundaries, better than no education at all.<sup>68</sup> For instance, by transcending

<sup>67</sup> As Kierkegaard puts it, “Here [in the communication of capability] “the teacher” has competence, virtuosity.” By contrast, “The preachers [“these days”] are like gymnastics coaches who cannot swim themselves and then instruct people in swimming.” *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers: Volume 1, A–E*, entries #653:3 and #660.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the remarks by Masland, and those by Phillips. The claim that the “an Internet based education is better than no education at all” is a far cry from the claims of people such as Linda Harasim, Starr Roxanne Hiltz, Lucio Teles and Murray Turoff who, in their book *Learning Networks: A Field*

the “typical problems of place, time, distance, transportation and physical well-being,”<sup>69</sup> Internet based education makes instruction available to a variety of groups – “non-traditional students, working students, those living in remote areas, those with temporary or permanent physical handicaps, to name but a few”<sup>70</sup> – who might otherwise be excluded.<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, as we have seen, there are good reasons for believing that unqualified optimism about “online environments” is misplaced. Unless education involving the creation and use of virtual classrooms can be clearly demonstrated to be at least as good as real classroom interaction, we should be concerned about the apparent eagerness to move more and more students into virtual classrooms at the cost of diminishing more traditional classroom environments.<sup>72</sup> If, as Sven Birkerts suggests<sup>73</sup>, the “ultimate point of the ever-expanding electronic web is to bridge once and for all the individual solitude that has hitherto always set the terms of existence,” then it is important that we not conflate the use of CMC as a tool with the use of CMC as an end in itself. In this connection, projects such as the Kansas Collaborative Research Network, based in the Kansas City, Kansas School District, are hopeful and encouraging signs. Students participating in the network created a Webpage<sup>74</sup> designed to be both a resource on and about communities, as well as an opportunity for students to work together on a collaborative project. These students were required to combine their Web-authoring activities with face-to-face communication with one another, members of their geographically based communities, their families and friends. Still, what we can learn from Kierkegaard is that questions about the degree to which we should willingly advocate using the Internet for education and “bringing people together” requires a careful and thoughtful examination. As Kierkegaard’s example shows us,

*Guide to Teaching and Learning Online*, p. 27, write:

The traditional face-to-face classroom learning situation is generally assumed to be the best to support learning, with other learning modes perhaps perceived as less effective. There is no evidence to support this assumption. In fact, quite the opposite is true: Online environments facilitate learning outcomes that are equal or superior to those generated in the face-to-face situation.

<sup>69</sup> Barnette, p. 327.

<sup>70</sup> Barnette, p. 327. Also see Bock, p. A1.

<sup>71</sup> See Associated Press, “Distance learning available online,” p. A10.

<sup>72</sup> See Heath, pp. 277–300. Also see Borgmann, pp. 207–208, and Oppenheimer.

<sup>73</sup> Birkerts, p. 19.

<sup>74</sup> The Webpage’s URL is <[www.arthes.com/community](http://www.arthes.com/community)>.

such examination requires a careful sorting of content appropriately suited to CMC from content that may not be amenable to quality education without there being actual persons, located in actual classrooms, engaged in face-to-face committed dialogue.

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